

# COMMENTARY

## WHO IS GUILTY OF THE KATYN MASSACRE?

*The Truth at the Bottom of the Pit*

G. F. HUDSON

THE massacre of Katyn is quite unique among the famous atrocities of history in that there is doubt by whom it was committed. In other cases, historians may dispute over the number of the victims, over the motives of the act, or over the responsibilities of particular individuals, but there is no question by what nation or faction the deed was done. Nobody

doubts that the massacre of St. Bartholomew was committed by the French Catholics, or that the massacre of Chios was the work of the Turks, or that it was the Nazis who put Jewish families into the gas chambers of Auschwitz. But with regard to the corpses of Katyn, as in a detective story, the question facing the historian is: Who did it?

Inevitably this question has involved polit-

---

EDITORIAL NOTE: As a magazine devoted to Jewish affairs and contemporary issues, and particularly to the analysis of events bearing upon the liberties and decencies that we as individuals and as groups enjoy in civilized lands, COMMENTARY has from the first regarded totalitarianism, fascist, Nazi, or Communist, as a matter for vigilant and intelligent scrutiny. Opinions may differ as to how best to combat this inhuman and immoral thing—and we have printed differing opinions. But that it is evil, that we cannot countenance self-deluding ignorance or wishful thinking with regard to it—this we have never doubted. So, to the best of our ability, we have tried to unveil the true dimensions of the monster, noting the anomaly that, where its Communist species was involved, we sometimes earned ourselves little sympathy in certain liberal circles.

This has served to remind us that until the blind spots in “enlightened” opinion are eliminated, it will be hopeless to expect the American community as a whole to have an adequate appreciation of the meaning and menace of Communism. Everyone, these days, is “anti-Communist” and cheerfully assents to denunciations of Stalin or to praise of one or another version of the American way. But just as it was once possible to be “anti-fascist” without being able to recognize the true features of totalitarianism, so today it seems to be possible to be “anti-Communist” in the same way. To the extent that such a recognition is lacking, anti-Communism, far from being a dead issue, may yet turn out to be the liveliest, because the deadliest, of issues.

We publish, in this month’s COMMENTARY, four consecutive articles—by G. F. Hudson, Peter Meyer, Lionel Trilling, and Irving Kristol—that in their different ways illuminate different aspects of what Communism is and what values we are defending against it. These authors are not necessarily in entire agreement with one another; but we feel that each makes a specific contribution, and that the sum total furthers the understanding of what is beyond a doubt the crucial political and moral reality of our epoch.—EDITOR



ical interests and passions on the largest scale. At the time of the German announcement of the discovery of the Katyn graves in April 1943, there was no impartial investigation of the matter, for although the Polish government-in-exile in London asked for an inquiry by the International Red Cross, Russia refused to agree to it, and the International Red Cross declined to act without Russia's consent. Everyone was therefore free to have his own opinion about Katyn in accordance with his prejudices, and Dr. Goebbels had as obvious a propaganda interest in attributing the crime to Russia as Russia and her Western allies had in repudiating his accusation. Since the end of the war, the Communists everywhere have resolutely maintained that the assertion of Russian guilt was only a Nazi slander endorsed by Polish fascists (even though Communists are always ready privately to maintain that the extermination of "class enemies" is justifiable whenever expediency requires it). As for Westerners generally, including many who have no pro-Soviet sympathies, they feel that any effort to establish Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre would be retrospectively a rehabilitation of Goebbels, besides giving aid and comfort to those who have raised doubts about atrocities that certainly were committed by the Nazis. But the question is, after all, one which historians in the future will judge strictly according to the evidence, and the evidence now available is already sufficient for reaching a conclusion, once political preconceptions are discarded.

---

FOR the past month a Congressional investigating committee has been holding hearings on the Katyn massacre—the murder of thousands of Polish officers in a Russian forest, which the Nazis charged had been committed by the Soviets, and the Soviets by the Nazis. Here, G. F. HUDSON, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, guides us through the tangle of charges and evidence—for there is evidence, and when looked at objectively it points to a conclusion. Mr. Hudson is a regular contributor to the *London Economist*, and has contributed articles on the Korean war and Iran to earlier issues of COMMENTARY.

IN SPITE of the accusations exchanged between Berlin and Moscow during the war, the Katyn case is not primarily a duel between Germans and Russians. The victims of the deed were Poles, and it was a fate that fell upon them not only as individuals but as a nation; it was a great national disaster. About a third of the pre-war officer corps of the Polish army, including both regular soldiers and reservists, disappeared in Russia. The Poles as a nation could not but be deeply concerned to find out what had happened to their missing officers; moreover, these officers had families in Poland and numerous relatives and friends in the Polish army that fought in Western Europe and North Africa between 1939 and 1945, and the evidence which they have collected is of the greatest importance for the solution of the problem.

During the last two years this evidence has been given to the world in three books\* by Poles who were directly concerned in the investigation of the affair. One is by General Wladislaw Anders, who was commander-in-chief of the Polish army which was recruited from prisoners and deportees in Russia during the temporary Polish-Soviet reconciliation of 1941-1942 and subsequently saw action in the Middle East; the second is by a well-known Polish painter, Joseph Czapski, who, as a wartime officer, was put in charge of a special commission of the Polish army to trace the missing prisoners in Russia; the third is by Joseph Mackiewicz, a former Polish journalist and member of the Polish underground, who went to Katyn while the corpses were being disinterred by the Polish Red Cross in the spring of 1943.

It may be objected in advance against all this testimony that it comes from anti-Communist Poles now in exile who have every motive for fabricating charges against the Soviet Union. It has to be remembered, however, that in the period 1941-1943 Poland

---

\*General Wladislaw Anders, *Katyn* (Editions France Empire, Paris). Joseph Czapski, *The Inhuman Land* (Chatto and Windus, London; to be published this month by Sheed and Ward, New York). Joseph Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders* (British Book Center, New York).



was at war with Germany and not with Russia. The Communists have, it is true, charged the wartime Polish government in London with being "Hitlerite," but the vigor with which the Polish armed forces fought against Germany for six years, and the uncompromising character of the resistance within Poland under the leadership of the so-called "London Poles" prove the absurdity of this accusation. Whatever were the Polish grievances against Russia, the wartime Polish hatred for Nazi Germany was far too strong for there to have been any general willingness among Poles to connive at a fabrication of evidence against Russia in support of Nazi allegations.

The secret police of a one-party totalitarian state in its own territory, with witnesses entirely in its power, can concoct such a case, but the Polish government in London and its delegates within Poland represented a coalition of all Polish parties with the exception of the Communists, and they were always seriously divided over the attitude to be adopted toward Russia. In 1941 Zalecki resigned as Foreign Minister because he thought General Sikorski was going too far in his effort to conciliate Russia and in 1944 the Mikolajczyk cabinet broke up on the question of the concessions that might be made to Moscow. If, therefore, certain anti-Russian extremists had had the idea of falsifying the evidence about Katyn in order to fix the guilt on Russia, such a maneuver would at once have been exposed by those who were working for a reconciliation with Russia; moreover, the number of persons involved in the evidence, whether as witnesses or investigators, was far too large, and their political complexion much too varied, for any fabrication by a clique to have gone undiscovered.

**T**HE Katyn story begins with the capture of a large part of the Polish army in September 1939 by the Soviet forces that invaded Poland from the east seventeen days after the Germans had invaded it from the west. Both Germany and Russia subsequently took the position that the Polish state had

ceased to exist and that Poles, in accordance with the German-Soviet agreement for the new partition of Poland, had become German or Soviet subjects. There were, however, two differences in the relation of Germany and of Russia to Poland after the joint conquest. Germany remained at war with Britain and France, which recognized the Polish government-in-exile as a sovereign belligerent ally, and a Polish army remained in the field, first in France and later in Britain; Russia was not embarrassed by any such situation. Secondly, Germany was a signatory to the Geneva convention on prisoners of war, whereas Russia was not.

Among the prisoners of war captured by the Russians (a total of about 230,000 according to Soviet sources), nearly all the officers, numbering about 9,000, and a number of non-commissioned officers and private soldiers of special categories, such as gendarmerie and frontier guards, making 15,000 in all, were placed in three special camps at Kozielsk, Starobielsk, and Ostashkov. In these camps they were subjected to lengthy interrogations, not for eliciting military information—for all fighting had ceased—but to discover their family and personal connections, their political opinions and former political activities (if any). Finally, in April 1940, about 400 were sorted out from the 15,000 and sent to a camp at Pavlishchev Bor, whence they were later transferred to another camp at Griazovets; these were all either Polish citizens of German extraction (and therefore regarded as friendly during the heyday of the Nazi-Soviet pact) or Poles who, whether from conviction or prudence, had expressed pro-Soviet sentiments during the interrogations. The rest of the prisoners in the three camps were sent away to unknown destinations, and those who were removed to Pavlishchev Bor did not know what had become of them. Later, the prisoners in Pavlishchev Bor began to receive letters from relatives in Poland asking for news of the others; from which they inferred that correspondence—which was still permitted to them—was being denied to their comrades.



On October 7, 1940, German troops entered Rumania, and for the first time the Soviet government became aware of the possibility that Hitler might, after all, in spite of that master stroke of Soviet diplomacy, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, reach out for the Ukraine. Three weeks later a Polish officer who had shown particularly marked pro-Soviet inclinations, a certain Lieutenant-Colonel Berling, and two others were summoned to meet the two chiefs of the NKVD, Beria and Merkulov, at the Lubianka Prison in Moscow. There they were asked whether they would help in organizing Polish military units for possible future use, under Soviet command, against Germany. Berling agreed, but suggested that the Polish officers who had been removed from the Kozielsk, Starobielsk, and Ostashkov camps should be brought into the scheme. To which Beria replied: "No, not those. We made a grave mistake about them." This cryptic remark, repeated by Berling to other officers, caused much speculation among the Polish prisoners confined in the camp at Griazovets.

**W**HEN, in June 1941, Hitler launched his invasion of Russia and the Russian army suffered shattering initial defeats, British diplomacy brought about a renewal of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Polish government in London. Russia agreed to grant an "amnesty" to all Polish prisoners of war and deportees in Soviet territory and allow the Polish government to recruit among them an army which would take part in the war against Germany. General Anders, who had been held in solitary confinement in a Russian prison, was appointed to command the new army; he set up his headquarters and soon Poles were arriving to enlist from all parts of the Soviet Union, even from the Kolyma gold fields of northeastern Siberia. But it was quickly realized that there were hardly any ex-officers among them and that thousands of officers who had been captured in 1939, including a number of generals, were missing. Inquiries were addressed to the Soviet government,

but no satisfactory reply was received; Soviet officials simply said that all prisoners had been released in accordance with the agreement and that they did not know the whereabouts of particular individuals. When after several months not a single Pole who had been in Kozielsk, Starobielsk, or Ostashkov before these camps were cleared in the spring of 1940 (except for the 400 taken to Pavlishchev Bor) had reached the Polish recruitment centers, the Polish military authorities became very uneasy. At their request the Polish government in London made inquiries in Poland through the Polish underground to ascertain whether any news of the missing men had been received there, but was informed that their families had not received any letters from them since May 1940, though previous to that date correspondence had been permitted.

When representations to the Soviet Commissariat for Foreign Affairs produced no result, the matter was taken up directly with Stalin, first by the Polish ambassador, and then by the Polish Prime Minister, General Sikorski, who visited Moscow in December 1941. Stalin's only contribution to the solution of the problem was the suggestion that the missing prisoners might have escaped into Manchuria—which implied that they had been sent to Siberia. At the request of the Poles, the British and American ambassadors in Moscow also called the attention of the Soviet government to the matter, but with no effect. By April 1943, after a year and a half of search and inquiry had failed to produce any trace of the missing officers, the Polish leaders had already come to the conclusion that the Soviet authorities were lying in their assertions that they did not know what had happened to the prisoners, and reluctantly inferred that they were no longer alive.

**I**N APRIL 1943 the German radio announced the discovery of corpses in the uniform of Polish officers in mass graves in the forest of Katyn not far from Smolensk, and declared that they were victims of a Russian massacre. The Polish response to the news



was to issue a public statement relating the history of the affair (which had not hitherto been mentioned in the Allied press) and to request an investigation of the Katyn graves by the International Red Cross. The German government also invited an International Red Cross investigation, but the Soviet government not only refused to agree, but also broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government, accusing it of complicity with Germany in not having immediately denounced the German allegations. At the same time the Soviet government put forward a version of the fate of the Polish officers of which nothing had previously been heard; the government now stated that they had been confined in camps to the west of Smolensk and had been captured by the Germans when they overran the area in the course of their invasion in July 1941.

It is clear that if this Soviet version is true, the Soviet leaders must have been aware of what had happened during the whole period when Polish, British, and American inquiries were being addressed to them in the effort to trace the missing prisoners. Why, then, did they not say that the Polish prisoners, along with some hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers, had fallen into German hands during the great retreat of 1941? If the Russians were innocent in the matter, there was no reason why they should not have admitted from the beginning what they subsequently alleged. If, on the other hand, they were guilty, they had a very cogent reason for not telling such a story except as a last resort; knowing that the Katyn graves were in German-occupied territory, they could only hope that they would not be discovered, but if they told the Poles that their prisoners were in German hands, the Poles would inquire for them in Germany through the International Red Cross, and the Germans might become too interested in looking for them. So long as the Russians persisted in saying that they did not know where the Polish officers were, nobody could prove that they were dead; only with the exhumation of the corpses of Katyn did the problem of the missing prisoners become

a question as to who had murdered them.

After the Russians had reoccupied the Katyn area in September 1943, they appointed a "Special Commission for Establishing and Investigating the Whereabouts of the Shooting of Polish Officers by German Fascist Aggressors in the Katyn Forest." This body, composed entirely of Soviet citizens—not even Communist Poles were represented on it—published a report which elaborated the Soviet version that had been put forward after the German announcement of the discovery of the graves. This report estimated the total number of corpses at 11,000 and declared that the Germans, having killed the Polish prisoners in the autumn of 1941, decided after their defeat at Stalingrad to charge the crime against the Russians, and therefore in March 1943, a month before publicly announcing the discovery of the graves, dug up all the bodies, removed from them all documents bearing dates later than April 1940, and reburied them.

**B**EFORE the Germans withdrew from Katyn, they allowed the Polish Red Cross to carry out an examination of the Katyn graves. The Polish Red Cross made no public statement about what they found, and could not therefore be charged with helping German anti-Soviet propaganda; their primary purpose was to identify as many bodies as possible in order to inform the relatives of the dead men, but their full report on the evidence was transmitted secretly to the Polish government in London through the underground.

The Polish Red Cross investigation showed that the total number of corpses in the Katyn graves was not quite 4,500,\* and that all of them had come from the Kozielsk camp; there were no prisoners from the Starobielsk or Ostashkov camps. The Germans, however, had already announced that there were be-

---

\*Polish official statements at that time indicated a total of about 11,000 Poles missing, but later collation of the records showed that the figure was higher. As the Russians had never communicated any lists of names of prisoners of war, the compilation was a matter of considerable difficulty.



tween 10,000 and 12,000 corpses, and the Soviet Commission report, as mentioned above, put the figure at 11,000. The Germans naturally had an interest in magnifying the number of victims for propaganda purposes. For the Russians the significance of the number involved was rather different. If only the prisoners from Kozielsk were in the Katyn graves, where were those from Starobielsk and Ostashkov? None of them has ever been seen again, so it may be presumed that those who were not at Katyn perished elsewhere, but nothing definite is known of their fate. By putting the figure at 11,000 the Soviet Commission's report implied that all the prisoners from the three camps had been killed at Katyn, and the problem of separately accounting for the prisoners from Starobielsk and Ostashkov was eliminated.

The Polish Red Cross found about 3,300 letters and postcards on the corpses, none bearing a date or stamp later than April 1940; a number of diaries all ending in April or the first week of May 1940 (one of them describing in its last entry the journey in a truck under NKVD escort from the railway station of Gniezdovo to Katyn forest); and hundreds of copies of newspapers or dated fragments, all of March or April 1940. The Soviet Commission report, as we have seen, implies not that the Polish Red Cross was lying on this matter, but that they had been deceived, for it alleges that the Germans had dug up the bodies in March 1943 and had removed all documentation of dates later than April 1940.

This is the crux of the whole story and Mackiewicz in his book has no difficulty in refuting the Soviet explanation. In the first place, it was not only a question of removing papers, but also of substituting others—of re-writing and forging details in diaries and especially of producing the required quantity

of Russian newspapers of the spring of 1940, which, except on the extremely improbable assumption that large stocks of them had fallen into German hands, would have had to be specially reprinted from files for the purpose of being planted on the bodies. But even if all this elaborate forgery had been carried out, the alleged process of planting was technically impossible. As Mackiewicz writes of his observation of the exhumations at Katyn:

"As everything was soaked and glued with a most loathsome, stinking and gummy cadaverous liquid, it was impossible to unbutton the pockets or pull off the boots. It was therefore necessary to cut them with knives in order to find the personal belongings. . . . No human device or technique would enable a search to be made through those pockets, taking out some objects and putting in others, and then to button up the uniforms, and replace and squeeze the bodies again into a mass, layer upon layer. . . ."

Indeed, it is not necessary to rely on the Polish evidence in order to reject the story of the faking of the documentation in March 1943 as a manifest impossibility. Whether the bodies had been in the earth since the spring of 1940 or the autumn of 1941, they would certainly have been in just such a condition as Mackiewicz describes, and it would have been absolutely impossible to conceal the traces of the alleged faking operation. To have presented such a piece of work to the impartial experts of the International Red Cross would have involved certain exposure. We must conclude, therefore, that the alleged exhumation and reburial in March 1943 never took place, and that the dating of the documentation on the corpses determines the date of the massacre. And, as Mackiewicz says, if we know when it was done, we also know who did it.